

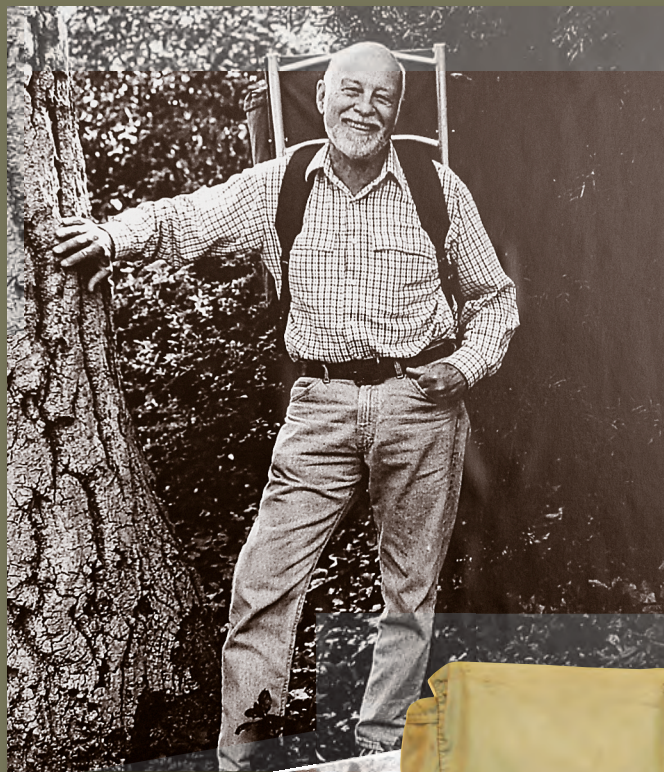
# OUTDOOR ICONS DICK KELTY

The “Father of the Frame Pack” revolutionized hiker comfort with backpack design

BY KATHY CABRERA

When a National Geographic explorer holds a particular man personally responsible for overcrowding the wilderness for good reason, you know the man in question has to be an icon as big as the outdoors. While that man, Dick Kelty, was best known as the father of the frame pack, he was just as importantly an avid outdoorsman, family man and entrepreneur whose innovations have evolved over a span of time and who continues to live on with his legacy today — more than six decades since he founded his family business in 1952.

Kelty is credited with inventing the first aluminum frame backpack, which improved the way in which hikers could accomplish what they loved to do — hiking trails for hours on end, but without the pain of having straps of the pre-Kelty-era canvas backpacks digging into their shoulders. Beyond enhancing hiker comfort, the impact the invention had on the outdoors is perhaps best described by Nick



**Top:** Dick Kelty wearing one of his own creations. **Above:** Kelty backpacking with the family in the Sierra Nevada, California. **Right:** Kelty and family in front of his first store. He had borrowed \$500 against the family home to start Kelty Pack. **Upper right:** One of the A2 packs from the late 1950s. **Lower right:** The Kelty 50th Anniversary pack.



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Clinch, an explorer for *National Geographic* magazine (as told to Kelty's wife, Nena, in her 2000 book, "Backpacking the Kelty Way"):

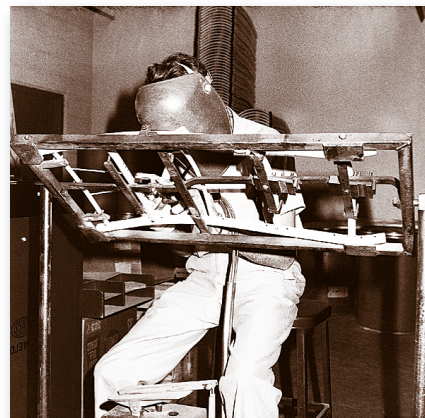
"I blame Dick Kelty for overcrowding the wilderness. By taking the weight off the hiker's shoulders and putting it on the hips, he took the misery out of the sport. He made it enjoyable for people to go backpacking."

Becoming an outdoor industry leader wasn't at the forefront of Kelty's mind when he was working as a carpenter in Southern California in the late 1940s. Instead, the calling seemed to have found him, a ready craftsman and outdoor consumer, when he thought there had to be a better way of toting around gear than wearing an awkward, heavy pack made of wood and canvas while backpacking. In 1952, Kelty borrowed \$500 against the family home to officially start Kelty Pack. Kelty began experimenting with the creation of aluminum frame packs in his home garage. Frame pieces were bent by hand over wooden mandrels. Finished frames were hydrogen-torch welded together, and Nena sewed the pack bags. The family's living room became an impromptu store and by the end of the year, 29 of the new packs had been sold, grossing \$678.

By 1954, the Keltys sold 220 packs. The Kelty aluminum frames were built to hug the back and help to remove the weight from the shoulders. The nylon pack itself was narrowed significantly more than existing canvas packs, allowing the pack to conform more closely to shoulder width, and multiple compartments were created to distribute gear and balance the load. Soon, a small mail-order catalog business was created, and orders started rolling in.

By 1963, Kelty Pack had reached a new level when the packs were used exclusively on the first American ascent of the West Ridge of Mount Everest. Three years later, *National Geographic*'s Antarctica expedition team also used the packs.

From the mid-1960s through today, the company founded and inspired by Kelty has continued to innovate and expand its product line with gear that



**Kelty welding an aluminum pack frame on one of the original jigs.**

helps to "lighten the load" of anyone seeking outdoor adventure — from the first-time family camper or solo hiker to an expedition leader en route to high peaks — by making the experience more comfortable and the user more confident in the process. Other Kelty firsts include a stainless-steel, quick-release waist belt buckle used on a backpack. The company offers a full line of backpack rain covers, air mattresses, camp pillows, nylon-covered sleeping pads, daypacks, internal frame packs, outdoor clothing, child carriers and tents.

In 1979, Kelty's company was bought by American Recreation Products Inc., which continues to operate the business today in Colorado. Kelty passed away of natural causes in 2004 in Glendale, California. But the way Kelty's love for the outdoors inspired his inventions continues with the employees who carry on his work today — many of whom share his passion.

"Most Kelty employees are avid outdoor enthusiasts who include hiking, camping, biking, mountaineering and snow sports among the list of activities they pursue. This active outdoor lifestyle inspires us to create gear that we would want to use," says Vincent Mares, senior designer with Kelty. "Having a lot of experience with a variety of gear helps us to identify what works — and what doesn't — in a backcountry or other outdoor situation. This knowledge is then transferred into the work we do creating new equipment." ▲